

Luke, The early years of Jesus

I. Notes

A. The overriding theme of the quarter is to talk about the Kingdom of God from an NT Wright perspective. He wrote the commentary, but it's a "lay" commentary and so doesn't really hit the points I want to make:

1. It's about the coming Kingdom
2. The Kingdom is about community
3. It's a community with a radically different ethic
4. It's a community that changes the world (salt and light)
5. It's a community that relates to one other differently

B. It's not rules we impose on the world through government or even a transformed culture. It's changing people from the inside out by the power of the Spirit to be like Jesus. But being like Jesus is far, far more challenging than we often think.

1. The gospel is highly political. Jesus (and John) again and again take on the authorities by prophetically calling the powers to repentance. And they die for their trouble.
2. Today's church should be willing to stand up to government, rather than being an apologist for the rich and powerful.
3. If the powers-that-be find no threat in the church, we are not the church.

C. Wright's *What Paul Really Said* is a better book from this standpoint, but this is not about Luke. John Howard Yoder's *The Politics of Jesus* is all about Luke, and I'll be reading it for a third time. It's written at a scholarly level but it's key points can't be taught at the lay level to good effect.

D. No one needs to read these books to teach, but they're great books if you don't mind a scholarly work—and they'll rock your world.

II. Background

A. Luke is written by the physician Luke, who traveled with Paul on many of his missionary journeys

B. Luke recites that he interviewed witnesses (the people who were actually there) and checked his facts. It's easy to imagine that he spoke with Mary and Elizabeth, for example, as he provides details of Jesus' early years found nowhere else.

(Luke 1:1-4) Many have undertaken to draw up an account of **the things that have been fulfilled** among us, ² just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were **eyewitnesses** and servants of the word. ³ Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything **from the beginning**, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴ so that you may know **the certainty of the things you have been taught**.

C. Unlike Matthew, which is written to Jews, Luke appears to be written to a Greek audience. Therefore, the Jewish background is more carefully explained

D. Luke also pays more attention to the medical condition of people Jesus heals, etc. You can tell a doctor wrote it.

E. Luke has many of our favorite parables and more details of Jesus' birth than the other gospels.

F. A major theme of the gospels is that Jesus has come to fulfill prophecy (v 1). However, this is not offered as a matter of Christian evidences (although it is). The point is that Jesus is realization of God's plan for us that was revealed by the prophets.

III. Zechariah's story

(Luke 1:5-20) In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. ⁶ Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly. ⁷ But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years. ⁸ Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, ⁹ he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. ¹⁰ And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

¹¹ Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. ¹³ But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. ¹⁴ He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he **will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth**. ¹⁶ Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ And he will go on before the Lord, in **the spirit and power of Elijah**, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the

wisdom of the righteous--**to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.**"

18 Zechariah asked the angel, "**How can I be sure of this?** I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."

19 The angel answered, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. 20 **And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words,** which will come true at their proper time."

A. It's not smart to doubt an angel!

B. The passage is filled with references to prophecy. The prophets had prophesied the return of Elijah .

(Mal 4:5-6) "See, I will send you the prophet **Elijah** before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. 6 He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse."

C. Many passages prophesied that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit would accompany the coming of the Messiah.

(Luke 1:21-25) Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. 22 When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak. 23 When his time of service was completed, he returned home. 24 After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. 25 "The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people."

D. The last of many Biblical stories about God bringing a child to a barren woman. Very reminiscent of Sarai — but Elizabeth didn't laugh.

(Luke 1:26-33) In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, 27 to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." 29 Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. 30 But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. 31 You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. **The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David,** 33 and **he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.**"

E. This is unambiguously Messianic language, reflecting numerous OT passages. “Jesus” means “God saves” — it’s the same word as “Joshua.”

F. What are the parallels with Joshua?

(Luke 1:34-38) “How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?”

35 The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. 36 Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. 37 For **nothing is impossible with God.**”

38 “I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May it be to me as you have said.” Then the angel left her.

G. Compare Mary’s faith to Sarah’s and Abraham’s. Giving birth as a virgin was surely even less believable than giving birth at age 99! And just how do you explain this to your *mother*?

H. “Nothing is impossible with God” may well be thought of as the theme of the entire book.

(Luke 1:39-40) At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, 40 where she entered Zechariah’s home and greeted Elizabeth.

I. Just like cousins that Mary would go tell Elizabeth — but notice that she was willing to share this “impossible” secret with Elizabeth because Elizabeth had received a similar miracle. We don’t see Mary telling anyone else for quite a while.

(Luke 1:41-45) When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. 42 In a loud voice she exclaimed: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! 43 But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? 44 As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. 45 **Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!**”

J. Elizabeth, by inspiration, praises Mary for her remarkable faith.

K. Here we see Elizabeth being expressly credited with speaking by inspiration. This tells us —

1. That the age of prophecy had returned. The Jews had wondered why the Holy Spirit had been absent from Israel since Malachi and

Zechariah, nearly 500 years earlier. Again, the return of the Spirit was a Messianic sign.

2. God first gave the Spirit to a woman. He could have had Zechariah speak or someone else, but Luke makes an obvious point here and later that God blesses and approves women, even with speaking God's words. Women are no second class citizens of the Kingdom of God in Luke's gospel.

L. The Magnificat —Mary's inspired speech is call the Magnificat, because this is the first word of the speech in Latin.

(Luke 1:46-55) And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord *47* and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, *48* for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, *49* for the Mighty One has done great things for me-- holy is his name. *50* **His mercy** extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. *51* **He has performed mighty deeds** with his arm; he has **scattered those who are proud** in their inmost thoughts. *52* He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. *53* He has **filled the hungry** with good things but has **sent the rich away empty**. *54* He has helped his servant Israel, **remembering to be merciful** *55* **to Abraham and his descendants forever**, even as he said to our fathers."

M. Mary recalls several major Biblical themes, which become themes of the Gospel of Luke

1. God is merciful. None of what we are to see is deserved or earned. It's all because God wishes to be kind and generous.
2. God's story is about his mighty deeds. The Creation, the birth of Isaac, the Exodus, etc. are all God's working in history that point to this moment. God has been working mightily since the Beginning to bring this to pass.
3. God demands humility. (Why is being proud so wrong? Because it fails to acknowledge God's glory. If we think we deserve what he does, we can't appreciate what he does. If we think we are saved by our intellect, then we credit ourselves, rather than God. This is no small thing—it's the very essence of our relationship with God.)
4. God cares about our physical needs as well our spiritual needs. "Hungry" and "rich" are not metaphors. You can't read the Law and the prophets and fail to realize God's profound concern for the needy.
5. God is no respecter of persons. If you're rich, you gain no points. God gives to those who have need—if they appreciate their need.

6. The promise to Abraham is a big deal to God. It's not a bit of curious history—it's why he did all this. Jesus' coming is the fulfillment of a promise made over 2,000 years before hand.

7. Mary was either inspired or the best theologian of her age.

N. The birth of John

(Luke 1:56-65) Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home. ⁵⁷ When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. ⁵⁸ Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy. ⁵⁹ On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, ⁶⁰ but his mother spoke up and said, "No! He is to be called John." ⁶¹ They said to her, "There is no one among your relatives who has that name." ⁶² Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. ⁶³ He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, "His name is John." ⁶⁴ Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue was loosed, and he began to speak, praising God. ⁶⁵ The neighbors were all filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things.

O. Clearly, God meant to give John a head start in being a prophet. The miraculous events surrounding his birth created an expectation that God has something extraordinary planned.

(Luke 1:67-80) His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied: ⁶⁸ "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has **redeemed his people**. ⁶⁹ He has raised up a horn of **salvation** for us in the house of his servant David ⁷⁰ (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago), ⁷¹ salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us-- ⁷² to show mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, ⁷³ the oath he swore to our father Abraham: ⁷⁴ to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear ⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. ⁷⁶ And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will **go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him**, ⁷⁷ to give his people the knowledge of **salvation through the forgiveness of their sins**, ⁷⁸ because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven ⁷⁹ **to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.**" ⁸⁰ And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel.

P. Finally, a *man* receives the Spirit!

Q. Zechariah refers to Isaiah and Malachi—

(Isa 40:3-5) A voice of one calling: “In the desert **prepare the way for the LORD** ; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. *4* Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. *5* And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

(Mal 3:1) “See, I will send my messenger, **who will prepare the way before me**. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the LORD Almighty.

(Isa 9:2) The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.

(Isa 49:6) he says: “It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.”